

Familial Adjustment of Working Women: Role Expectations and Role Conflict

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Abstract

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been marked by unprecedented transformations in the status of women across the world. Once confined primarily to domestic roles, women have moved steadily into education, paid employment, and positions of leadership. Industrialization, urbanization, and globalization have opened new avenues for women, leading to their greater participation in the workforce. However, this advancement has not come without challenges. Working women are required to manage dual and often conflicting responsibilities — those of their professional roles and those of their familial and domestic obligations. This dual burden has led to considerable emotional, psychological, and social strain, giving rise to role conflict and adjustment issues within the family. The present paper, based on secondary data, attempts to understand how working women manage familial adjustment while fulfilling social expectations, the causes and consequences of role conflict, and the evolving attitudes of families and husbands toward working women. The study concludes that the reconciliation of traditional gender norms with contemporary professional identities is a complex yet essential task in the journey toward women's empowerment.

Keywords: Working women, role conflict, familial adjustment, gender roles, women's empowerment, social change.

1. Introduction

The changing position of women has been one of the defining social developments of the twentieth century. With the growth of education, industrialization, and political democratization, the role of women has undergone a profound transformation (Kapoor, 1997). Traditionally, women's primary identity was associated with domesticity — as homemakers, caregivers, and nurturers. Their responsibilities were centered around the household, and their contributions to the family were largely unpaid and unrecognized in economic terms. The social structure was predominantly patriarchal, with men serving as breadwinners and women as dependents.

The transition from this traditional structure to a more egalitarian one has been gradual and uneven. Industrialization and urbanization in India, especially post-independence, led to significant shifts in family structures and social relations. The joint family system, once a hallmark of Indian society, began to give way to nuclear families due to economic pressures and migration (Bharat, 2001). As living expenses rose and consumer aspirations grew, a single income was often insufficient to sustain a family. Women's entry into the workforce became not only desirable but often necessary.

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However, the entry of women into paid employment did not diminish their domestic responsibilities. Instead, it added another layer to their existing obligations. Working women are thus expected to excel in their professional lives while simultaneously managing household duties and child care. This dual expectation has resulted in significant stress, conflict, and adjustment challenges, both at home and in the workplace.

The concept of familial adjustment refers to how working women manage the balance between professional and domestic roles, ensuring harmony in family relationships while maintaining efficiency at work. Yet, as Goode (1960) pointed out, when expectations from multiple roles clash, the resulting tension leads to role strain — a common phenomenon among contemporary working women. This paper explores these issues through an extensive review of existing literature to understand the complexities of familial adjustment among working women in India.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present study is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To understand the concept of familial adjustment and its significance in the lives of working women.
2. To analyze the nature and causes of role expectations and role conflict faced by working women.
3. To examine the impact of work-family conflict on women's mental health, marital satisfaction, and family functioning.
4. To explore the evolving attitudes of husbands, children, and extended family members toward working women.
5. To suggest measures for enhancing familial adjustment and reducing role conflict among working women.

Each objective is interconnected, emphasizing the interplay between social expectations, gender roles, and family dynamics.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Concept of Role and Role Conflict

The concept of "role" refers to the set of behaviors, attitudes, and obligations expected from an individual occupying a particular position in society (Kahn et al., 1964). When a person occupies multiple roles — such as employee, wife, and mother — the demands from these roles may clash, leading to what Goode (1960) described as "role conflict." Working women, by virtue of participating in both professional and domestic spheres, often experience this conflict intensely.

Kahn et al. (1964) identified various types of role conflict: inter-role conflict (between two different roles), intra-role conflict (within the same role), and person-role conflict (between an individual's personal values and role expectations). For working women, inter-role conflict is the most prevalent

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— the incompatibility between professional and family roles results in stress, time pressure, and emotional fatigue.

3.2 Traditional Role of Women

Historically, Indian society has viewed women through the lens of domesticity. Kapur (1970) emphasized that “the essence of womanhood” was culturally linked to her ability to nurture, sacrifice, and serve. The homemaker’s role was multifaceted, involving not only cooking and cleaning but also emotional caregiving and social management. Singh (1988) noted that women served as the “emotional anchors” of families, maintaining harmony and relationships across generations.

Even with modernization, these expectations have persisted. Socialization processes from childhood reinforce the notion that women are naturally suited for caregiving, while men are oriented toward economic provision. Consequently, when women pursue professional careers, they often carry the guilt of deviating from traditional ideals, which exacerbates role strain (Rani, 1992).

3.3 Emergence of the Working Woman

The participation of women in paid employment in India began increasing significantly after independence. Chaudhary (1992) and Kapoor (1997) noted that education and economic reforms created new opportunities for women in teaching, administration, medicine, and even corporate sectors. The “working woman” thus emerged as both a symbol of progress and a site of social tension.

However, as women entered formal employment, their dual responsibilities multiplied. The separation of workplace and home created a sharp division between paid and unpaid labor (Bharat, 2001). Women’s work outside the home was recognized economically, but their domestic labor remained invisible and undervalued. This imbalance reinforced the emotional and psychological pressures faced by working women.

3.4 Dual Role and Psychological Stress

Sekaran (1986) conducted one of the earliest comparative studies on role stress in dual-career families. She found that women often experienced “role overload,” as they were expected to perform multiple demanding roles without adequate support. Singh and Bhatia (1981) observed that women in urban India reported higher levels of anxiety, fatigue, and job dissatisfaction compared to men, primarily due to conflicting role expectations.

Rani (1992) further highlighted that the absence of adequate household infrastructure and support systems intensified the psychological burden. The expectation that women must perform efficiently at work while maintaining perfect households leads to guilt, burnout, and, in some cases, depression.

3.5 Impact on Family Relationships

The employment of women has redefined the authority structure within families. Traditionally, the husband was viewed as the “head of the household,” while the wife’s role was subordinate. Goode (1960) argued that men often resist any challenge to their authority, perceiving women’s financial independence as a threat. Bhattacharya (2004) found that educated working women in urban India

frequently experienced marital tension, as husbands were reluctant to share domestic duties or accept their wives' success.

However, there is evidence of change. Mehta (2010) observed that younger couples, especially in urban areas, are increasingly adopting egalitarian arrangements. Shared responsibilities and mutual understanding have become more common, indicating a slow but positive shift in gender relations.

3.6 Social Attitudes and Gender Stereotypes

Despite progress in education and employment, social attitudes continue to confine women within traditional stereotypes. Kaur (2007) noted that working women are often judged by how well they manage domestic duties rather than their professional accomplishments. The persistence of patriarchal norms leads to internalized guilt and stress among women who feel they are "failing" as mothers or wives. Jain (2002) emphasized that this psychological conditioning restricts women's potential for personal growth and self-fulfillment.

4. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive research design based solely on secondary sources. No primary data were collected; instead, the research relies on the critical examination of existing literature, government reports, and academic publications.

The methodology includes:

1. **Data Source:** Secondary data from books, peer-reviewed journals, and sociological reports published before 2015.
2. **Sampling Frame:** Selection of key authors and studies discussing familial adjustment, women's employment, and role conflict.
3. **Method of Analysis:** Thematic content analysis identifying recurring patterns and themes related to family adjustment, gender roles, and social change.
4. **Scope:** The study focuses on Indian working women but references international literature where relevant.

This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the issue by synthesizing multiple perspectives across disciplines.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Changing Family Dynamics

The shift from joint to nuclear family systems has profoundly altered women's experiences. In joint families, domestic responsibilities were shared, and elder family members provided child care and emotional support. The nuclear family, while offering privacy and autonomy, has increased women's domestic load (Bharat, 2001). Without extended family support, working women must manage both job and household tasks, leading to chronic fatigue and stress.

Urbanization has also led to changes in lifestyle and aspirations. Families now strive for higher standards of living, which often requires both spouses to work. However, despite women's financial contributions, their domestic workload remains largely unchanged, illustrating the persistence of gendered division of labor (Bhattacharya, 2004).

5.2 Role Expectations and Social Conditioning

Cultural norms continue to dictate that a woman's primary duty is toward her home and family. From an early age, girls are taught to value patience, obedience, and caregiving. Kapur (1970) observed that these ideals are so deeply internalized that women themselves feel guilty if they fail to meet them. As a result, when women engage in professional work, they often experience "double guilt" — one from not fulfilling traditional domestic expectations and another from underperforming professionally.

This social conditioning creates a psychological paradox where success in one domain is perceived as failure in another. The working woman's identity thus becomes a constant negotiation between the traditional and the modern.

5.3 Emotional and Psychological Implications

Multiple studies (Sekaran, 1986; Rani, 1992) reveal that working women frequently report emotional exhaustion, irritability, and decreased life satisfaction. The lack of domestic help, inadequate childcare facilities, and unsympathetic workplaces contribute to mental strain. In severe cases, prolonged stress leads to psychosomatic disorders such as headaches, insomnia, and hypertension (Singh & Bhatia, 1981).

Moreover, women's inability to find time for self-care and recreation further deteriorates their well-being. Their life often becomes a mechanical repetition of duties, leaving little room for personal growth or creativity.

5.4 Marital Adjustment and Spousal Support

The attitude of the husband is a key factor influencing familial adjustment. Goode (1960) noted that men often resist sharing domestic duties due to ingrained patriarchal beliefs. However, Bhattacharya (2004) found that mutual respect and communication significantly reduce marital tension. Educated, urban husbands are increasingly recognizing their wives as equal partners. Mehta (2010) observed that couples who shared household chores reported higher marital satisfaction and reduced role conflict.

Nonetheless, in many households, women's employment is still perceived as secondary or supplementary. This mindset prevents true equality and reinforces role overload among women.

5.5 Social Change and Emerging Trends

The twenty-first century has brought gradual but noticeable change. Urbanization, education, and exposure to global media have challenged rigid gender norms. Younger generations are more accepting of dual-earner arrangements and shared parenting. Organizations are also recognizing the

need for work-life balance, introducing flexible schedules and maternity benefits (Kaur, 2007).

However, these changes are uneven across regions. In rural and semi-urban areas, patriarchal values remain deeply entrenched, and women's work participation is often accompanied by social scrutiny. The coexistence of modernity and traditionalism thus creates a transitional phase marked by both progress and tension.

6. Findings and Suggestions

Findings:

1. Working women face significant role conflict arising from incompatible demands of family and profession.
2. Traditional gender norms continue to shape familial expectations despite women's economic independence.
3. Lack of spousal support and institutional mechanisms intensifies women's psychological stress.
4. Familial adjustment improves with education, communication, and shared responsibilities.
5. Younger generations are gradually moving toward more egalitarian gender relations.

Suggestions:

1. Promote shared domestic responsibilities through community awareness and education programs for men.
2. Encourage organizational support systems, including flexible work hours and child care facilities.
3. Provide counseling and stress management workshops for working women to improve coping skills.
4. Integrate gender sensitivity training in schools and workplaces to challenge stereotypes.
5. Encourage research and policy initiatives addressing the psychological health and work-life balance of women.

7. Conclusion

The familial adjustment of working women remains one of the most complex and dynamic aspects of modern social life. While women have achieved remarkable progress in education and employment, their domestic responsibilities continue to weigh heavily upon them. The persistence of traditional role expectations in a modern context has created inevitable conflict and strain.

However, signs of transformation are evident. As society becomes more educated and urbanized, men's attitudes are changing, and institutions are becoming more supportive. The journey toward gender equality is gradual, but achievable. True empowerment will be realized not merely when

women enter the workforce, but when their professional and domestic contributions are equally valued, shared, and respected.

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